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Two Great Lakes states have balked at an agreement that would keep outsiders from siphoning off the lakes' water, raising fears that the long-sought water plan could be in danger.

Proponents tried Monday to regain momentum for the water-use agreement, the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence River Basin Water Resources Compact.

Unless the eight U.S. states and two Canadian provinces abutting the lakes unanimously enact the agreement, it will be non-binding. The pact also needs to be approved by the U.S. and Canada governments.

Building that kind of consensus is difficult. It took governors and resources advocates more than four years just to write the Great Lakes water-use plan in 2005, then years more for a handful of state legislatures to sign on. Only Illinois and Minnesota have ratified the pact. This month, Indiana and New York entered the home stretch after the plan was approved by the legislatures and is awaiting the governors' signatures.

But last week, proponents say, Wisconsin and Ohio threw a wrench in the works.

To lawmakers in Madison, Wis., including Assembly Speaker Mike Huebsch, signing off on the Great Lakes compact risks giving a say over how Wisconsin apportions its water to governors of seven other Great Lakes states.

And in Columbus, Ohio, state Sen. Tim Grendell has raised ire for suggesting the agreement might shift private water rights across northern Ohio to government control. Lawmakers in each state offered alternative wordings.

In response, the compact's proponents say they feel the plan is in peril.

"It's troubling that the proposals were made at this time. It has the potential to make the enactment process much more difficult," said David Naftzger, executive director for the Council of Great Lakes Governors. "The longer our region waits to enact the compact, the more likely the courts become involved or the Congress becomes involved in how the lakes are managed."

A debate over who can use Great Lakes water -- and who has the right to control it -- has flared in state capitols from St. Paul to Albany in the last year.

As the Southeast endures drought, the Southwest fights fires, and the dwindling Colorado River meanders across seven Western states, interest has grown in finding new water supplies. Meanwhile, efforts to approve the Great Lakes compact have gained urgency for industrial-belt officials like U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk (R-Ill.), who sees the country's focus shifting west and south.

With that population shift, goes some of the Great Lakes states' sway. By the time the 2010 census redraws congressional districts, the chance for lakes states to lock away the compact may be gone, Kirk said at a news conference Monday in Chicago's Shedd Aquarium.

"We have the opportunity now to take control of Great Lakes water for Great Lakes states," said Joel Brammeier, vice president for policy at the Alliance for the Great Lakes. He said he hoped these new developments wouldn't derail the compact for long.

Interest in the future of the Great Lakes has spread as water levels creep to near-record lows, particularly in Lakes Michigan and Huron.

"It's become clear over the last couple of years just how big a problem low water levels have become in the Great Lakes," said Col. John D. Drolet, commander of the Army Corps of Engineers' Chicago district. Marinas have nearly bottomed out and lake freighters have had to offload hundreds of tons of goods to squeak through channels connecting the lakes to the outside world.

On Monday, Kirk's news conference at the Shedd Aquarium overlooked the Chicago skyline and a white-capped vista of Lake Michigan. He called for more funding to study the lakes' low levels, for passage of the compact and limits on future diversions.

As an example of the price of bad water policies, Kirk pointed to satellite photos of Uzbekistan's Aral Sea, flush with water in 1973 and all but drained by irrigation and poor water practices by 2004.

"This is a fate that we cannot allow for the Great Lakes," he said.

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